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#Bookfairs: new 'old' media and the digital politics of Somali literary promotion

Peter Chonka¹

Abstract

Since 2008, Book Fairs held across the Somali Horn of Africa have been a remarkable feature of civil society activism in a region usually associated with conflict and crisis. At the forefront of these efforts to promote Somali-language print culture is a digitally-connected and social media-savvy generation of young people. This article explores the work done by books (as symbolic objects) and Book Fairs (as multimedia cultural festivals) to provide spaces for debate about Somali identities. Attention to local histories of media development is necessary for understanding the relationships that exist between print and digital culture, and the destabilisation of clear temporal distinctions between 'old' and 'new' media technologies. This ethnographic study shows how the contemporary social media environment affects the ways in which print culture is promoted - facilitating cross-border civil society networks, and intensifying the political salience of literary activism for actors articulating different visions of Somali statehood.

Introduction

In external accounts, the archetypical 'failed' state of Somalia often remains characterised as 'the world's most dangerous place' (Fergusson, 2013), prone to chronic instability and recurrent humanitarian crises. Such epithets fail, however, to convey various ongoing efforts at state reconstruction, pockets of economic dynamism, and the cultural capital wielded by a digitally-connected global community of Somalis inside and beyond the region. Over the last decade, print culture has become an important feature of debates about post-conflict reconstruction. 'Book Fairs', organized by local and diasporic intellectuals and activists across different Somali political centres, have been designed to challenge narratives emphasising violence, and showcase a resurgence of Somali-language print culture. The Hargeysa International Book Fair, held in the capital city of the breakaway independent (but diplomatically unrecognised) Republic of Somaliland, celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2017. Since 2014, other Somali cities including Mogadishu (political capital of

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the Federal Republic of Somalia) have emulated this literary festival model and have succeeded in capturing international attention (Tran, 2012).

The emphasis on print culture in the Book Fairs is not the result of a lack of digital media in these societies. Since the collapse of the centralised Somali state in 1991, the territories have experienced rapid development in telecommunications infrastructure (Feldman, 2007; Nurhussein, 2008). Mobile phones are virtually ubiquitous and internet-connected smart phones are widely used in urban areas¹. Online publishing and social media facilitate Somali news broadcasting and political debate across the territories and into the global Somali diaspora (Issa-Salwe, 2008; Osman, 2017). The Book Fairs are extensively and intensively mediated through digital technologies, reflecting and amplifying their social, political and cultural significance to dispersed audiences.

This article explores the work that books (as symbolic objects) and Book Fairs (as multimedia cultural festivals) do to provide spaces for debate around Somali political and ethno-nationalist identities. As a quintessential 'old' media technology, it is striking how discussions around books have come to play this role within these youth-dominated events, themselves held in cultural contexts historically associated with a rich oral poetic tradition. The case study demonstrates how books have been operationalised by civil society actors, not just in order to respond to threats to local print literature, but also to navigate through local socio-religious tensions around different forms of cultural expression. I argue that the salience of print culture must be understood here with reference to specific histories of media and literary change in the region. This context destabilizes clear temporal distinctions between old and new media technologies and throws into question notions of linear media technology progression (or potential 'leapfrogging'). A variety of historical factors – including the relatively recent adoption of a formalised Somali script and the cultural disjuncture brought by civil war and state collapse – have meant that print (book) publishing has long been marginal across the territories. However, recent economic growth, increased stability in certain areas, and diasporic influences have meant that books have (re)emerged into the cultural landscape as a media form that is, in many ways, 'new' to many young cultural consumers. The fact that the post-independence Somali state historically played an important role in the transition of Somali from an oral-only to standardised written language, currently endows the (post-)conflict re-emergence of print culture with nationalistic significance for competing political authorities laying new claims to sovereignty in a reconfigured Somalia.

This ethnographic account of the Book Fairs demonstrates how contemporary digital culture affects the ways in which print culture is promoted – both in facilitating cross-border networks of civil society activists, *and* intensifying the political salience of literary activism for various actors

articulating different visions of Somali statehood. The extensity of social media coverage of these events is explored below with regard to the ways in which participants and organisers use platforms (such as Facebook) to facilitate local, diasporic and other international engagement. The intensity of this mediation is analysed in terms of elite political social media interventions, online controversies surrounding the legitimacy of the events, and critiques of external portrayals of the region from local digital communities.

After surveying the wider literature on print cultures in the digital age, and explaining this study's methodology, the article then outlines Somali historical experiences of print and digital culture. It presents ethnographic and (social) media data from Book Fairs, first focusing on the longer established Hargeysa event, and then its more recent emulation/adaptation in Mogadishu. Examining the branding and facilitation of the event in Hargeisa, the account illustrates how books have become an important symbolic vehicle for the wider promotion of local culture. The subsequent focus on the digital mediation of the events shows how multiple actors associated with the region's cultural heritage industry deploy a variety of media techniques and technologies to 'imagine' and construct an ethno-linguistic community of cultural producers and consumers (Anderson, 2006). At times, these initiatives correspond with particular state-building agendas in the fragmented region. However, they also exemplify the role of a complex digital media ecology in facilitating expressions of cross-border cultural identity that are not necessarily tied to any particular state project.

Global print culture(s) in the digital age

In order to unpack the symbolic role played by books in a particular 'Global South' context of cultural activism, the following section outlines relevant trajectories, emphases and insights of literature spanning cultural and media studies, as well 'ICT for development'. It considers Western-focused debates around publishing in the digital age, and the ways in which ethnographic approaches to media objects help us understand the cultural and political significance of interactions between print and digital cultures in the region.

Digital-literacy debates in the West have commonly featured speculations about the eclipsing of print, or the impact of hyperlinked media environments on readers' attention spans (Birkerts, 2006). Later, the commercial implications for the publishing industry of the rise of e-books, and the scholarly and ethical implications of print digitisation became important areas of study (Gomez, 2008; Hall, 2008; Dewan, 2012). The youthful enthusiasm for the Somali Book Fairs explored below jars with these Western discussions around the decline or fundamental re-imagining of the book publishing industry. By contrast, the case studies explored in this article show how a revival of print

publishing is discursively associated with the re-emergence of Somali states, cultural renaissance, and economic change across the region.

Given the absence of concerns about the 'death' of books in the context, it is more useful to draw on accounts of how books can be conceived of as cultural objects - the production, circulation and commoditisation of which both reflects and helps shape public spheres. Bolter associated his conception of the 'late age of print' with a 'vigorous' late capitalism (2001: 3); and Striplhas' deployed this historicisation in his account of the integral role of book production and consumption in 'the making of a modern connected consumer culture in the twentieth century' (2009: 5). For Striplhas, books represent the tension in Marxist conceptualisations of the 'commodity' between generic materials and the abstract values that can be attached to them (2009: 5). Books can be sacred objects whose purchase is redolent of middle class aspirations and standing above other forms of 'vulgar consumption' (Striplhas 2009: 6; Miller, 2008: 19). This is certainly relevant in other contexts, as the analysis of the value of books in the Somali Book Fairs will demonstrate.

Nevertheless, the historical touchstones of media technology development that punctuate the above accounts all draw from 'Western' civilisation: from Socratic/Platonic debates on orality versus print and the invention of Gutenberg's press, to Heidegger's treatise on the typewriter, and the invention of the World Wide Web. Drawing on critiques of 'silence about location' - as performances that universalise a Western philosophical tradition (Sundberg, 2014: 35) - this article attempts to ground its analysis of the interaction of print and digital culture in a particular African context. I argue that such dynamics may take quite different forms in parts of the world (that some might regard as) sitting on the 'peripheries' of global informational capitalism. The rapid expansion of internet penetration in areas such as the Horn of Africa over the last decade heightens the need to expand analyses of interactions between print and digital cultures into broader non-Western settings.

Similar to what Wasserman identifies in internet studies more generally (2017), research that does engage with media technology on the African continent often tends to take an economic and teleological 'ICT for development' focus. For instance, this field often explores concepts such as 'leapfrogging' - the emphasis on the potential of 'developing' countries to skip certain stages of media infrastructure to their (supposed) advantage. Napoli and Obar (2013) provide a critical analysis of some of the disadvantages that may be associated with the bypassing of 'traditional' PC-based internet access (such as limitations of memory or speed, or content availability), whereas the trends presented below demonstrate how 'old', previously marginal forms of media technology may not be desired to be 'skipped' at all.

This brings us back to the important *symbolic* value of particular media objects, and the ways in which they become relevant within (and facilitate) particular public spheres of debate. My approach to this question draws from recent ethnographic African media studies that question ‘what part [...] media objects play in the construction of persons, and of different sorts of communities (national/religious/social), and in processes of social change’ (Vokes and Pype, 2018: 207-208). Vokes and Pype here adapt Clifford’s concept of ‘chronotypes’ to media objects - ‘fictional setting[s] where historically specific relations of power become visible and [in which] certain stories can “take place”’ (Clifford, 1988: 236). Somali Book Fairs – as increasingly visible and regular events in the region – are usefully thought of as such performative chronotypes; settings that make possible particular meanings, values and actions. The advantage of this approach, according to Vokes and Pype, is that it allows for an escape from limiting conceptual binaries. This article (from the oxymoron in its title onwards) illustrates destabilisations of clear temporal boundaries between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media technologies, and illustrates the importance of local experiences of media technology development, marginalisation and re-adoption. Pype’s (2018) work on ‘dead media objects’ in other African contexts similarly affirms the importance of historicising particular media technologies. Her ethnographic account of the display of defunct and broken media objects in the living rooms of elderly people in Kinshasa shows how certain old technologies are used to make claims about the present. The apparent absence, in that case, of emic categorisations of ‘modernity’ in popular discussions of ICT ownership and use, and a different focus on markers of ‘youth’ (Pypes, 2018: 226), also chimes with the Somali case studies. Emphases on ‘youth’ in the Somali Book Fairs are more frequently articulated than discourses of ‘modernity’. Here, however, young people engage with the symbolic capital of an ostensibly ‘old’ media technology that is far from being ‘dead’ in the context.

Contributions to African media studies increasingly draw on and adapt Jenkins’ conceptualisation of ‘convergence’ (2006). Local histories of media technology development mean that users and producers employ multiple, overlapping means of engagement with multimedia content (Willems, 2013). Collapsing categorisations, accounts such as Avle’s (2017) contextualise the changing practices of audience engagement with radio broadcasting, through phone-ins, SMS messaging and multi-platform social media engagement. Building on such transmedia theorisation, this article explores specific variations in historical experience of adoption, marginalisation, destruction or apparent renaissance of media technologies, which help account for current interactions between print and digital culture. In this regard, Walton (2010) argues that digital devices have the potential to change the ways in which different groups engage with the written word. She usefully highlights a ‘paradox’ in South Africa where socio-economically marginalised students are ‘left behind’ in terms

of formal literacy skill acquisition, but simultaneously take active part in the mobile phone 'revolution', using their devices for 'frequent rich interactions with the written word' through social media platforms and practices (Walton, 2010: ii). The South African and Somali contexts are different, and yet the impact of new literacies of (local-language) social media use demands similar scrutiny. Historically, for a predominantly 'oral' society, literacy rates and engagement with the Somali written word have been low. Therefore, it is significant that emerging local social media literacies involve extensive popular use of written Somali in platform interactions. Exploration below of contributions to the Book Fairs demonstrates how popular participation in these social media spaces itself contributes to increasing (and often transnational) attention being paid to the *general* status of the Somali written word.

The importance of the digital mediation of literary festivals has been highlighted by studies into audience experience and interaction through platforms. Weber (2015) points out that audiences' aesthetic appreciation, intellectual engagement, emotional responses and communicative practices are themselves digitally-mediated and contribute to the creation of a 'public' within the cultural field and particular event (Warner, 2002; Driscoll, 2015). In the Somali cases, the stakes of this mediation and interaction process are arguably higher. Aside from fostering connections between a literate audience and important transnational cultural producers, these events have acquired wider political significance. For Hargeysa, the Book Fairs have long served to bolster the Republic of Somaliland's case for international recognition and its reputation as an 'island of stability' (Gettleman, 2007) in an otherwise turbulent region. For Mogadishu, the Book Fair has more recently fed into a locally (and diasporic) driven 'Somalia rising' narrative (Hammond, 2013) that highlights purported improvements in the security situation since 2012.

Elsewhere in Africa, social media platforms have enhanced the capacity of citizens to speak to and critique dominant external narratives (Adeiza and Howard 2016). Nyabola's (2018) nuanced account of 'how the internet era is transforming politics in Kenya' demonstrates how social media spaces may reinforce offline barriers and build bigger segregated 'information silos', and yet still contribute to the overall widening of a national public sphere. In Kenya, the digital promotion of the nation as a misrepresented 'haven of peace' is both a powerful articulation of citizens groups' dissatisfaction with an objectionable Western media gaze, as well as being a deeply political (and 'bourgeois') act (Nyabola, 2018: 43). This is a useful insight for my exploration of similar tensions within digital mediation of literary promotion in the highly-charged context of Mogadishu's complicated and contested 'rebirth', and with regard to Somaliland's vociferous claim to independence.

New media technologies also facilitate the popular archiving of 'tradition', and can empower 'non-official' actors to challenge dominant narratives (Pietrobruno, 2013). In regions such as East Africa, civil society plays an ever-increasing role in heritage industries, in both collaboration and competition with state authorities (Fouere and Hughes, 2015). As such, the digital tools at citizens' disposal become important for understanding how these processes unfold, and the further blurring they may encourage of boundaries between state and non-state agency. Although the Book Fairs in Hargeysa and Mogadishu are driven by civil society actors, they are linked in complex ways with state authorities in settings where such authority is potentially weak, contested, unrecognised or under various stages of 'reconstruction'.

Methodology

This article is primarily based on ethnographic participant observation undertaken at the 2017 and 2018 Hargeysa International Book Fairs and the 2017 Mogadishu Book Fair. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the primary organisers of the Book Fairs as well as the founder and director of a prominent publishing house who attended both of the events. The article also presents examples of Somali-language news and social media coverage. These include the President of Somalia's social media engagement with the events, as well as posts and campaigns that debated (alleged) external agendas, and critiqued external representations of the Book Fairs.

The 2017 Hargeysa Book Fair was a week-long event held across ten different venues in the city (marking its tenth anniversary), whereas the Mogadishu Book Fair ran over three days in one hotel venue in the centre of the city. In Hargeysa there were numerous foreigners (from other African countries and elsewhere) in attendance. At the Mogadishu event there were significantly fewer foreign visitors and I was the only non-African foreigner in the audience. It should be noted that categorisations of 'foreigner' and 'local' can be complicated, and at both events there were many 'diaspora' Somalis who had returned to the region either to visit or settle. Questions of security and the profile of attendees are important for the running and presentation of these events. As a white, Somali-speaking foreigner (who was invited to address the audience to introduce myself and my broader research) I was more 'visible' in Mogadishu than in Hargeysa. I was *made* visible to many through the innumerable 'selfies' I had taken with me by the overwhelmingly young (and smartphone-carrying) attendees of the Book Fair. Therefore my attendance (and its dissemination on social media) became, in itself, part of the event I was studying. Although reflexivity is essential, the presence of foreign guests has always been important for organisers in the development of the Book Fair 'brand' and for dispelling of notions of Mogadishu as a 'no go' zone for outsiders. As such, 2017 was similar to previous years where other foreigners had taken part.

Historicising Somali print and digital culture

The Somali Horn of Africa has a rich oral tradition of poetic literature. Historically, for a predominantly nomadic-pastoralist society oral poetry served multiple practical and artistic functions, ranging from news transmission and the maintenance of clan-group identities, to anti-colonial mobilisation or inter-clan conflict and reconciliation (Johnson, 1974; Samatar, 1982; Ahmed 1996; Andrzejewski, 2011; Ahad, 2015). Somalia gained its independence in 1960 - a moment marked by the unification of two of the Somali-speaking territories of the Horn of Africa (the British and Italian Somalilands) to form the Republic of Somalia. There remained a swath of neighbouring territory in which the majority of inhabitants spoke Somali. This was divided by colonial borders and later came to be incorporated into the post-independence states of Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. Unusual for post-colonial Africa, this 'Greater Somalia' was characterised by a striking degree of *relative* linguistic homogeneity. For many other post-independence African states a significant challenge entailed managing high degrees of ethno-linguistic diversity, while promoting a common (often colonially-inherited) lingua-franca for an inclusive national identity. Despite the presence of important ethnic and linguistic 'minorities' (Ahmed, 1995; Eno *et al*, 2010), there remains a Somali (*Maxaa Tiri*) lingua-franca that is used throughout the region. The majority of books presented at the Book Fairs are written in this form of Somali and a majority of the discussions are held in this shared language – as are the (social) media debates in a Somali digital public that cuts across political divides in the Horn of Africa and extend into the diaspora.

At independence in 1960, Somalia was inhabited by a population embedded in an oral linguistic culture of Somali dialects but lacking a nationally-agreed script. Contemporary debates engaged the desirability of a new 'Somali' orthography (complicated by potential regional and clan disagreements), adopting Arabic (which the religiously-educated of this almost entirely Sunni Muslim country were already versed in) or adapting a Latin-based alphabet (Laitin, 1977). Despite religious opposition, the eventual decision for the latter option was made in 1972 under the military regime of Maxamed Siyaad Barre. His rule would come to be associated with intense repression and the increased politicisation and militarisation of Somali clan divisions that would culminate in civil war in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the regime's promotion of the new orthography through mass literacy campaigns across the country remains an achievement remembered by many today. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the rapid expansion of Somali-language publishing in educational works, newspapers, and literary texts. Writers like Maxamed Daahir Afraax (who attended Mogadishu's 2017 Book Fair) were experimenting with new genres: Afraax published *Maanafaay*, one of the first Somali novels, in 1982 and pioneered new forms of literary criticism in Mogadishu's newspapers (Kapteijns, 1995).

This era of literary innovation was halted by growing regional resistance to the regime, ensuing civil war, and the collapse of Barre's government (and state institutions more generally) in 1991. In the north-west, Somaliland declared its independence (revoking its earlier union with the south) citing long marginalisation by the Mogadishu government and the brutal mass retaliatory violence meted out by Barre's regime against those populations believed to support rebel guerrillas. Much of the rest of Somalia broke up into warlord-ruled fiefdoms following the clan-based violence that swept the southern regions and the associated famine (Kaptein, 2012). For the south, the following two decades were characterised by statelessness, failed attempts at political settlement, and the eventual rise of Islamist governance and subsequent foreign military intervention. Al Shabaab's Islamist militancy grew out of the Union of Islamic Courts experiment in the south and the US-supported Ethiopian invasion in 2006. The group has been fighting against Western/UN-backed power holders in Mogadishu ever since. In 2012, an internationally-recognised Federal Government was established and has made some modest gains in securing in the capital and reconfiguring the state along 'federal' lines. Periodic moments of popular optimism accompany such political transitions, and a 'Somalia rising' narrative of local commentators, civil society activists and young diaspora 'returnees' highlights the economic redevelopment of cities like Mogadishu. The success of the ongoing process of the integration of federal states remains highly uncertain, and Al Shabaab remains undefeated. Meanwhile, the Republic of Somaliland stands apart from this entire process and maintains its position of independence, bolstered by economic growth and relative stability, as well as democratic political transitions, which have been absent in the south.

The lack of state institutions in the post-1991 era to preserve and promote the still 'young' written language - as well as the long absence of bureaucracies interfacing with the general population through the script - has meant that Somali-language instruction has been neglected in primary educational (Cassanelli and Abdikadir, 2008: 107). The degradation of 'pure' Somali (a controversial question in itself when it comes to 'minority' dialects) is frequently decried by intellectuals who recall the pedigree of oral poetic culture, and promote contemporary state and civil society efforts to preserve the language. These include initiatives like the Book Fairs, government directives on Somali language usage in state institutions (Xaqiiqa Times, 2015), and developments of cultural-educational infrastructure (Kowda Agoosto, 2015). Although state initiatives towards linguistic preservation are often more rhetorical than concrete, the fact that language promotion was one of the very few initiatives of the former military regime remembered with any fondness by cross-section of the Somali population heightens its nationalist significance and explains modern authorities' engagement with the Book Fair phenomenon.

Through the post-1991 period, news media in urban centres have provided some of the only channels where ordinary people have been exposed to the written Somali language. This has moved increasingly online, with news websites interweaving with popular social media platforms. The rapid growth of Somali cyberspace was itself, in part, facilitated by the ease of interface with the Latin Somali script, and the involvement of the worldwide diaspora. State reconstruction has been ongoing contemporaneously with the emergence of a dynamic local and transnational social media ecology. Facebook is the most ubiquitous platform used within the Somali territories – particularly by younger generations connected via cheap smartphones. This is similar to other ‘global south’ contexts where a first generation of mobile internet users have emerged for whom Facebook is the internet (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017: 229). Multiple other forms of news and entertainment media intersect through the platform. Somali Twitter use is more limited but appears to be growing in popularity. The platform has been characterised by a large proportion of diaspora users, or local elites, often conversing in English. Again, this is similar to other African contexts (*Ibid*). Importantly, these platforms link local audiences with diaspora populations who move back and forth between the Horn of Africa and Europe, North America, Gulf states and elsewhere where Somali communities reside. Commentators have noted the link between local social media penetration in the Horn and intensified aspirations for migration (Mohamed, 2015), and the movement of diaspora populations back and forth to the region is important for both local politics and civil society - fields in which significant proportions of important actors have lived abroad.

The Book Fairs have been initiated by diaspora ‘returnee’ activists, and these organisers and participants are deeply engaged in their promotion as a means to highlight positive change in the region. This is not to suggest that the events are dominated by the diaspora, and the analysis below demonstrates how they tap into wider local movements for literary promotion. Social media facilitates transnational engagement with this activism, and the basic written interface of the platforms also highlights the concern for the preservation of the Somali print culture. Speaking at the 2017 Hargeysa Book Fair, the internationally-renowned British-Somali author Nadifa Mohamed pointed out that (whilst she writes primarily in English) her engagement with Somali social media had ‘forced’ her to improve her written Somali and encouraged even greater interest in the language itself. She noted that social media afforded private spaces for diaspora to use and consume Somali content without fear of embarrassment on account of language skills ‘lost’ abroad.

Branding, debating, and ‘doing’ a Book Fair in Hargeysa

The first Hargeysa International Book Fair was held in 2008. As of the late 1990s there were less than an estimated 200 Somali language books in print, the vast majority of which had been published in

the 1970s and 1980s. As the founder of the event - writer, linguist and civil society activist Dr Jama Musse Jama put it, 'the raw materials' for Somali written literary culture were 'missing' at that time². Stability and economic growth in Hargeysa provided the opportunity for an event to promote print culture and encourage aspiring young Somali writers. From the outset, the Book Fairs were envisaged to serve as a platform for broader celebration of Somali cultural heritage, including the rich canon of oral poetry. Nonetheless, organisers of the first event decided to brand it as a 'book fair', as opposed to cultural 'festival', to avoid potential opposition from conservative commentators or religious leaders. Whilst the Somali territories have historically been characterised by the almost universal practice of Sunni (and Sufi-influenced) Islam, increasing emphases on public piety, particularly in the post-1991 era, have brought into question the acceptability of the performance of music and dance, even those considered part of Somali 'tradition'. Following Hargeysa's redevelopment after massive civil war destruction, physical venues for musical or theatrical performance have been lacking, in part due to increasing sensitivity around their religious acceptability. Jama explained that the idea of branding the event as a 'Book Fair' was partly due to the 'easily acceptable' and uncontroversial concept of the book, in and of itself, as a media technology.

Such concerns frame tensions encountered in organising a cultural event in a Somali context. Suspicions are often voiced in the wider public sphere of news and social media debate about unwanted foreign influences. These may be said to be driven by external funding for civil society organisations, or youth returning from the diaspora bringing with them attitudes and practices that jar with local religious sensibilities. As the Book Fair has received funding from foreign donors and is widely attended by diasporic writers and participants, there has been the potential for misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the event. In the past, organisers have been forced to deal with rumours and controversies spread through interconnected news and social media. For instance, the invitation in 2015 of British activist Jude Kelly, was taken by some local online commentators as evidence of the event's liberal foreign cultural agenda (Axmed, 2015). A public Somali-language Facebook post from a locally-based social media user on the day in question reflected this local suspicion. It began with a Somali proverb (literally: 'a shark goes with a dolphin') implying hidden danger in a seemingly benign setting. Emphasising rumours about external funding as an allegedly important factor, the post continued:

"A [young] woman named Jude Kelly who campaigns for same-sex marriage (men marrying each other and women marrying each other) is today standing at the Hargeisa International Book fair. She is presenting her view about this issue and that a person [should be] free. This shame has befallen the organisers of the Book Fair and I heard that she paid them the largest sum of money for the programme..."³

Jama pointed out that Kelly was not invited to speak on LGBT issues (and didn't do so). He described this as a highly stressful episode which was handled by the organisers through their close connections with local religious leaders. This resulted in a swift clarification of the situation that limited damage to the 'Book Fair' brand.

The format of the event highlights the centrality of the 'book' as a vehicle for the broader renaissance of Somali cultural production. The main venue of the 2017 Fair was the newly relocated Red Sea Cultural Centre, with most of the public discussions and presentations taking place under a marquee (since upgraded to a permanent structure), and surrounded by book publishers' stalls. The vast majority of books sold and presented at the Fairs are in Somali and encompass a wide range of genres and themes: historical fiction, romances, tales of the supernatural, and non-genre fiction often focusing on the lives of young people in the region and their connections with the diaspora. Non-fiction books included historical scholarship (from local researchers and translated works), anthologies of oral poetry, political polemics, and Islamic teachings.

The majority of these are published by local printing houses. The Book Fair provides the opportunity for young male and female authors to come on stage, speak about their work, and respond to questions from the chair and large, engaged, and similarly youthful audiences. Some of the books presented touched on new themes in modern Somali literature. Maxamed Carab Ismaciil's *Jin iyo Insi* ('Spirits and humanity') collection of ghost stories was one of the evening presentations that most enthused the audience, with questions about how 'fearless' he felt he needed to be to address topics that are rarely discussed in print. In another intriguing session, Fahiima Malwiid Muuse, a young, self-published female writer presented a book entitled *Kayntii Yeydii* ('The forest of the wolves'). Sat on stage, a full black *niqab* covering her face, she spoke about her work and answered questions from the men and women in the audience, some of whom were perplexed that familial behaviour of animals could provide lessons to humans, as the writer was suggesting (a cultural and religious aversion to dogs added to the sensitivity of the topic). One of the bestselling books at the event was Ismaciil Ubax's *Gaax*, a cross-historical love story with characters in Somalia/Somaland and the diaspora. Audience members at his packed session were particularly interested in one main character, a young Ethiopian Oromo man working as a rubbish collector in Hargeysa who falls in love with a local girl. Racial tensions exist around Oromo migration into the booming city of Hargeysa, and for a Somali book to touch on these issues was something of a novelty for the crowd eager to ask questions and express views.

Aside from several 'headline' speakers (mostly an older generation of scholars and poets) the majority of writers were in their 20s. Similarly, the audiences were overwhelmingly made up of

young men and women, often starting the days sitting in separate (if not officially mandated) seating areas, that would become more mixed as the sessions wore on. Many were high school and university students, where similar seating practices are common. In stark contrast to the stereotypical white middle-class and middle-aged Western literary festival, the Somali events are overwhelmingly youth-dominated affairs, with many people keen to emphasise the emergence of a new generation of readers interested in the print publishing and reading of Somali-language material. Indicative of the wider appeal of the phenomenon beyond Somaliland's capital, a dedicated session was held for representatives of 'readers clubs' in the towns of Berbera, Burco, Boorama, Gabiley and Laas Caanood. Their presentations depicted regular book-launch events and the building of new libraries.

Books are not the sole focus of the event and the Book Fair provides a platform for other types of cultural performance and discussion. Across ten venues, the 2017 evening program contained hugely popular poetry recitals and discussions featuring an older generation of widely-respected bards, whilst other sessions included performances from traditional instrumentalists such as Mohamed Hudeydi and singers such as Sahra Halgan and Xiddigaha Geeska (The Horn Stars). The latter pop group performed for the Fair's closing ceremony held in an expansive function hall of a new hotel. The venue was packed with more than a thousand young attendees eagerly anticipating the music that would follow the speeches of congratulations and thanks from notables such as Somaliland's Minister of Information. When the group finally came on stage innumerable smartphones were held aloft to capture the festivities, whilst hoardings at the back of the hall provided some impromptu cover for a group of young women (and a couple of men) to dance. Sat at the back of the hall with *dhallinyarada* (the youth) I could see that this dancing at the back had drawn almost as many looks as the performance on stage. It also caught the attention of the police/security personnel at the venue who moved in to keep order. With very few other public venues available for this kind of recreation, the Book Fair has thus become an important social occasion for many of Hargeysa's young population interested in literary (as well as more boisterous) pursuits.

Digital mediation and the politics of literary promotion

The political significance of the Book Fairs is amplified through their digital mediation. 'Connectivity' was the theme of the 2017 Hargeysa fair, emphasising the global nature of Somali cultural production through the region and across the diaspora. The event's social media presence was continually referenced by organisers and participants, indicative of the importance of broadcasting to wider audiences outside of the city. A dedicated social media 'army' maintained a stream of live-

tweets and video-feeds, and much was made in the closing ceremony of the ‘million views’ accrued via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube over the preceding week. Organisers promote the event on these platforms through dedicated documentaries, while they (and participants) photograph, comment and live-stream Book Fair sessions, often on Facebook. In the 2017 *Gaax* book-launch session, one young man sitting next to me in the audience uploaded video with the (Somali) caption ‘the recitation [by the author] of the letter written by Cali Oromo to Hodan’⁴ reflecting the interest of the crowd in that particular aforementioned aspect of Ubox’s cross-ethnic romance tale. To indicate the scope of this type of engagement, a search of one platform (Facebook) for uploaded videos from the 2017 Book Fair (and only those featuring the ‘official’ #HIBF2017 hashtag) indicates a total of 209,111 views of the assorted footage.⁵

The Book Fair is also broadcast into a wider digital public sphere of regional and international Somali-language broadcasting (Stremlau, 2016; Chonka, 2019). This Somali media ecology is distinct in that it is characterised by Somali-language broadcasters often based outside of the region (ranging from the BBC Somali Service, to private diaspora-headquartered satellite television stations or online media networks) that have audiences across the contentious borders of the wider Somali-speaking region. Somaliland has its own media industry that focuses on developments in the breakaway state and discursively constructs its political identity as being separate from the rest of Somalia. Nevertheless, media consumers in Somaliland are also audiences for these international broadcasters, and coverage of events such as the Book Fairs filter through these different types of networks.

The event has long served as a showcase for Somaliland’s stability, and its capital city’s role in the preservation and promotion of ‘Somali’ culture. The theme of the first Book Fair was ‘*Gobannimo*’ (‘self-determination’) and founders like Jama are self-professed ‘true believers’ in Somaliland’s claim to secession from Somalia. Another co-founder, Ayan Mahamoud (whose Twitter handle is @Gobannimo) is Somaliland’s Resident Representative to the United Kingdom and Commonwealth - the *de facto* ambassador. Book Fair publicity and venues are adorned with the red, white and green of the breakaway state’s flag and many participants use the event as platform to promote Somaliland’s case for recognition. Renowned doctor and vocal independence-activist Edna Adan’s speech at the closing ceremony of the 2017 Book Fair culminated in a rousing call and response chant of ‘*Somaliland Ha Noolaato!*’ (Viva Somaliland!).

Debates on the Book Fair phenomenon are linked to the political reconfiguration of the Somali state. They play out both for international audiences (from which recognition might be sought) and within

the Somali-language digital public. During the 2018 Hargeysa Book Fair, *Somalia's* President Maxamed Cabdullahi 'Farmaajo', tweeted (in Somali):

*'I offer to the praise the organisers, the literary community and the writers who are taking part in the Hargeysa Book Fair. We must keep in mind that the Somali people have a rich language, culture and literature. Congratulations to @JamaMusse and @Gobannimo. May this effort continue.'*⁶

Given that the event was taking place in the capital city of the breakaway Republic of *Somaliland* - most of whose citizens do not accept the authority of the President of the Federal Republic of *Somalia* based in Mogadishu - his statement was bound to generate controversy. Farmaajo's tweet appears innocuous, and was carefully worded with no mention made of either *Somalia* or *Somaliland*. Instead, it referenced a shared literary heritage of '*dadka Soomaaliyeed*' - an ethno-linguistically defined cultural community of 'the Somali people'. Although few *Somalilanders* would dispute this characterisation of Somali culture, the very fact of a Mogadishu-based president's intervention generated heated accusations that the Federal Government of *Somalia* was attempting to assert its authority over events in *Somaliland*. The first reply to the President's tweet came in English from a Hargeisa-based Canadian-*Somaliland*er businessman, Mo Hussein, and epitomised the pro-*Somaliland* recognition discourse:

*'This event took place in neighbouring Republic of #Somaliland. While it's a kind gesture to acknowledge the accomplishments of #Somalia's neighbour, wouldn't it make more sense to recognise the country that has made @HIBF possible on numerous occasions? Been nearly 30 years!'*⁷

The following day, all of the 'international guests' of the Hargeysa Book Fair were invited to the *Somaliland* President, Muuse Biixi Cabdi's official residence for dinner. He welcomed the participants and made the case for *Somaliland's* international recognition. Although the timing of the reception was not confirmed until the last minute, Jama told me that the event had been pre-planned and was not a direct response to Farmaajo's tweet the day earlier⁸. Nevertheless, the symmetry of these high-level engagements with this cultural event was striking, and underscored their political-diplomatic salience.

Despite its propaganda value for the state, organisers also emphasise that the Book Fair is an independent civil society initiative that does not receive funding (or direction) from the *Somaliland* Government. Jama noted that the organisers appreciate the 'hands off' stance of the authorities and their provision of security personnel for the events. It is also clear from the content of the Book Fair, the works presented, and the participants, that a (cultural-linguistic) pan-Somali identity is emphasised. There is frequent recognition that the issues affecting the status of the Somali language (and print culture) are shared across the Horn of Africa. Although the post-war political context of the region can make the travel of cultural producers difficult and controversial (the aforementioned

Xiddigaha Geeska singers were detained in Somaliland after visiting Mogadishu earlier in 2017) there are writers and publishers able to present at different Book Fairs across these boundaries. Somaliland's claim to independence is based on political history and has never taken on a cultural representation of distinctly 'northern' literary identity. As the naming of the state suggests, Somalilanders consider themselves 'Somalis' who share cultural heritage (particularly from the poetic canon) with Somalis in 'Somalia' and the wider region. This was a trope played on in President Farmaajo's congratulatory tweet. The content of the book fair exemplifies this appeal to a broader Somali ethno-linguistic identity, which is not seen as contradicting Somaliland's claim to political independence.

The fact that the Hargeysa Book Fair has been emulated outside of Somaliland highlights the political significance of the promotion of Somali print culture, *as well as* the links that exist across transnational and digitally-connected Somali civil society in an otherwise fragmented region. Mogadishu played host to its third Book Fair in 2017, the event having been previously established by the Islamic motivational speaker and civic-education activist Mohamed Diini. Jama and Diini both spoke to me of their contact with each other - the former sharing his experience of establishing a Book Fair during the latter's visit to Hargeysa. The Mogadishu Book Fair, although operating in a different political context to Hargeysa, was initiated in response to many of the same issues important to organisers in Somaliland. The attendance of some activists, writers and publishers at Fairs across Somalia/Somaliland indicates the ability of the format to transcend political boundaries. Indeed, at both events statements by writers that they had presented their work across this Somalia/Somaliland boundary were received with warm applause by the respective audiences.

Manager and founder of Looh Press, Mohammed Artan (UK-based but participating in Hargeysa and Mogadishu), described to me a network of writers, public intellectuals and publishers connected by platforms such as WhatsApp. Such figures coordinate literacy promotion across the region, sometimes under the auspices of cross-border organisations like the Intergovernmental Academy of the Somali Language (*Akadeemiye Goboleedka Af Soomaaliga*). With his background in video production, Mohammed explained how he was brought into that organisation to work as its social media communications officer, before returning to Somalia (Mogadishu) for the first time in 2014. Social media connections allowed him to identify active writers, some of whom encouraged him to establish a new Somali-language press⁹. Within this account of the development of print culture production, the role of online diaspora communities and social media platforms operating across the different political administrations of the region again becomes evident.

Despite the transnational links that facilitate digital civil society coordination, the politics of cultural heritage promotion remain important for actors in Mogadishu, the capital of the Federal Republic of Somalia and the seat of its government. Control of most of the city was only wrested from Al Shabaab in 2011 and that group continues to launch deadly attacks on targets associated with the state. Despite the violent ‘clan-cleansing’ of the city that followed the collapse of the military regime in 1991 (Kapteijns, 2012), Mogadishu retains its symbolic and literary significance as the historically cosmopolitan capital city of the Somali *Ummah* (Kapteijns, 2010). As such, the emergence of its Book Fair serves as part of civil society’s efforts to reaffirm Mogadishu as a cultural centre for Somalia, as well as advancing an externally-directed narrative emphasising the economic dynamism of a changing (albeit still conflicted) city.

Al Shabaab harbours intense suspicion towards the alleged foreign-sponsored agendas of civil society organisations, and continues to attack civilian locations such as hotels (Chonka, 2018). Therefore, ensuring the security of the Book Fair (itself held in a hotel in the centre of the city) has remained one of the biggest challenges for organisers. That the events have been held at all in the city since 2014 has itself garnered them international publicity. The increasing ability of local or diasporic commentators to engage with mainstream journalistic accounts of the city through social media has led to illuminating exchanges that reveal the symbolic importance of the Mogadishu Book Fair. Even stories that are intended to highlight positive changes in Somalia may be subject to intense critique, as responses to the BBC’s coverage of the 2015 Mogadishu Book Fair indicated. Whilst the online news piece by Mary Harper (a respected journalist, with significant experience in Somalia) highlighted the impressive achievement of successfully holding the event, a sub editor’s choice of title and accompanying image (showing the aftermath of a previous bomb attack) was criticised across the Somali digital public. The #SomeoneTellMaryHarper trending hashtag was initiated by Twitter-user @Cantoobo with this tweet, (in English):

#SomeoneTellMaryHarper #Somalia is Moving forward regardless of how @mary_harper and BBC chooses to portray ...¹⁰

This consciously echoed the #SomeoneTellCNN social media campaign that critiqued that network’s description of Kenya as a ‘hotbed of terror’ in 2015, and forced an apology (Adeiza and Howard, 2016; Nyabola, 2018). @Cantoobo (Mohamed Ahmed Cantoobo) is a diaspora ‘returnee’ and civil society activist who has served as commissioner of a Mogadishu district, and works for the municipality government. His background and profile is similar to many other young Somalis who have returned to the region following their (or their family’s) displacement in earlier phases of conflict. Many such individuals are involved in politics and business in the city. With their social

media literacy and connections (along with command of the English language) they are often at the forefront of attempts to publicise positive developments in Somalia.

Conclusion

Somali Book Fairs hold political significance partly because they catch the attention of international journalists. These journalists are increasingly in dialogue with Somali social media users, themselves attempting to advance alternative narratives about local developments. However, as the article has demonstrated, there exists a deeper 'nationalist' politics behind the promotion of local print culture that unites an otherwise fragmented Somali Horn of Africa. Somalia's apparent ethno-linguistic homogeneity has long been a contested political construct (Ahmed, 1995), and the process of the standardisation of the Somali script in the 1970s was similarly controversial. Nonetheless, this was remembered as an important project and is re-invoked today after the interregnum of civil war. Although legacies of that conflict remain un-reconciled, pockets of stability and economic development, as well as diasporic activism, have created spaces for new forms of cultural production and commoditisation to emerge. There is groundswell of youth-driven enthusiasm for written literature, and the dual emphasis in these Book Fairs on both oral heritage alongside print culture speaks to wider local tensions playing out in educational and administrative realms around adaptations of 'modern' and 'indigenous' knowledge (Woolner, 2016). These draw on rich Somali cultural repertoires, a literary-religious tradition of Islamic learning, and 'Western' educational texts and practices.

Responding to calls in the field of African media studies to challenge the taken-for-granted centrality of Western experiences of technology use and development (Willems and Mano, 2017), the analysis above demonstrates how a 'new' media environment can affect the ways in which supposedly 'old' media are valued and utilised. The significance of the Book Fairs has been highlighted across this politically fragmented region, and the importance of investments in the promotion of literary culture (as a part of broader processes of state reconstruction) are amplified through a transnational digital public sphere of debate across these territories. The development of print media and digital technologies are not conceived of in the context in terms of old and new, but rather as two sides of the same coin, interlinked in an overall objective to preserve a 'national' language perceived to be in danger. This is further exemplified by organiser Jama's work elsewhere in computational linguistics and the development of an online Somali corpus, a tool for education and historical scholarship on the language (Jama, 2016).

Relatively little research has been undertaken in Africa to assess the broader impact of interactions between print and digital cultures on trends of literacy and cultural expression, outside of formal

educational systems or state developmental agendas (Gagliardone, 2014). This is unsurprising given the dominance of the ‘ICT for development’ focus in contemporary scholarship on the continent. This article has eschewed a developmental focus has instead attempted to highlight some of the complex ways in which ideas of the value of print culture are articulated in digital spaces, and the work that the idea of the ‘book’ does in these events to create space for (disputed) national debates around Somali ethno-political identity. Local context matters here: destabilizing clear temporal distinctions between old and new media, and problematising notions of linear developments of media technology redundancy, (re)adoption and interaction.

Finally, the political implications of these processes may also be important for understanding the impact of new media literacies on post-colonial national identities. If the (European) birth of the nation as ‘imagined community’ was intimately associated with the development of print capitalism (Anderson, 2006), then the modern Somali experience hints at emerging relationships between multi-media technological change, imaginations of statehood, *and* (trans)national ethno-linguistic cultural identity. These are expressed, shared, and contested in new media practices across the Horn of Africa and beyond. Such identities are sometimes articulated with reference to particular state projects, but simultaneously invoke the notion of a broader ‘Somali’ community of literary activists, entrepreneurs and consumers. With this in mind, breaking the ‘silence about location’ (Sundberg, 2014: 35) can thus be highly provocative and productive for grounded studies of increasingly complex - and truly global – modern media ecologies, and the interactions of print and digital culture therein.

Endnotes

¹ Although the World Bank (2016) puts internet penetration at only 1-2% such estimates are hampered by difficulties in gathering data from multiple services providers across the territories. These statistics may already be out of date considering Somalia’s connection to the East African fibre-optic network in 2013.

² Interview, Jama Muuse Jama, British Library, London, 30 October 2017.

³ Facebook post by self-described local ‘civil society activist/youth advocate’ (6 August 2015). Translated and anonymised by author (accessed 11 January 2018).

⁴ Ridwaan Farhaan, Facebook video post, 23 July 2017, translated by author: <https://www.facebook.com/suldaanafkaarcompanydhibirg/videos/828096614023422/> (accessed 11 January 2019)

⁵ https://www.facebook.com/search/videos/?q=%23hibf2017&epa=SERP_TAB (accessed 11 January 2019).

⁶ @M_Farmaajo tweet, 23 July 2018, (Somali) author’s translation: https://twitter.com/M_Farmaajo/status/1021471469266702336 (accessed 28 August 2018)

⁷ @MoHussein tweet 23 July 2018: <https://twitter.com/MoHussein/status/1021492289426866177>

⁸ Conversation with author, Hargeysa, 24 July 2018.

⁹ Interview with Mohammed Artan, Looh Press, Leicester (UK) 17 January 2018.

¹⁰ @Cantoobo tweet 26 August 2015: <https://twitter.com/Cantoobo/status/636697292150571009> (accessed December 2018)

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